

HEAT WAVES | CHRISÉL ATTEWELL

8 June – 21 July 2024

catalogue.

**Berman
Contemporary
South African Art**

HEAT WAVES | CHRISÉL ATTEWELL

Curated by Els van Mourik, Senior Curator at Berman Contemporary

IN RETROSPECT

Last year changed its seasons
subtly, stripped its sultry winds
for the reds of dying leaves, let
gelid drips of winter ice melt onto a
warming earth and urged the dormant
bulbs to brave the pain of spring.

We, loving, above the whim of
time, did not notice.

Alone. I remember now.
- Maya Angelou

Since 2017, Chrisél Attewell has developed a practice across painting, sculpture and multimedia installations in which soil, stones, glass and other natural elements are her primary materials. Over time, her paintings turned from delicate colour shades to earth tones, and then into larger- scale installations. Chrisél's use of primary materials are informed by the landscapes in South Africa, and conveys the notion that nature is not something inert that we access and control at our will from an outside and exceptional position, but that we are earthly beings.

The exhibition HEAT WAVES (2024) features paintings, glass works and photography. In addition, Chrisél created an installation in the gallery space made from mixed soils found after the flooding that occurred during her artist residencies at Bodhi Khaya and the Tankwa Karoo. The mud paint installation suggests the topography of an exposed riverbed or flooded land. It was a captivating experience to see her working with the clay, like she was unlocking the spiritual and creative power of the land. Over time, the moisture and temperature will cause a cracked texture, revealing the underlying structures, which reflect the artist's thoughts on land use and ownership, as well as the prolonged and violent history of conflict and displacement in South Africa.

Soil can have so many colours – yellow, ochre, orange, grey, light brown, dark brown, black – depending on its chemical compositions. Soil is the matter from which everything emerges and comes back to, the medium of regeneration in the cycle of life and transformation, mediating relationships between water and land. As a viewer, you will find this dimension of the sacred earth, of fragility and of sadness, in Chrisél's oil paintings. Entering the exhibition space, you have the opportunity to experience the deep relation between us humans and the earth, and how we often lose awareness of that fact. Chrisél's ecological beliefs, in the interconnectivity, reciprocity and respect between all living things, leads her to create art that calls our attention to connections between people and the environment.

Her engagement with the world, as an artist and a woman, contains certain vital feminine aspects, such as listening, nurturing, harmony, connectivity,, emotion and knowledge acquired from intuition and bodily experiences. The polar opposites of anxiety and courage go hand in hand in her work, and it's a powerful acknowledgement of her female psyche, which makes her receptive to and intuitive with nature. We can never avoid uncertainty, but with patience and polite curiosity, we can propose shifting encounters with the vital resources of our earth.



CHRISÉL ATTEWELL

ARTIST STATEMENT AND BIOGRAPHY

In my practice, I strive to balance research with playful intuition. Responding to landscapes of trauma, my process is underpinned by a Haraway-like philosophy of 'polite curiosity'. Through respectful engagement and attentive listening, I seek to tell stories that highlight the social, historical, and ecological context of a given landscape, speculating its potential futures. In opposition to the human/nature dualism, I imagine a renewed relationship with the world through practices of curiosity, joy, play, and care.

Chrisél Attewell (b. 1994) is a multidisciplinary artist from South Africa. Her work is research-driven and experimental. Inspired by current socio-ecological concerns, Attewell's work explores the nuances in people's connection to the Earth and each other. She works with various mediums, including painting, installation, sculpture, and video, and prefers natural materials, such as hemp canvas, oil paint, glass, clay, and stone.

She received her BFA from the University of Pretoria (Cum Laude, 2016) and her MFA from the University of Johannesburg (Cum Laude, 2023). Attewell was selected as a Sasol New Signatures finalist (2016, 2017) and an ABSA L'Atelier finalist (2018). In 2018, she was a recipient of the Young Female Residency Award, founded by Benon Lutaaya. Her work has been showcased at Contemporary Istanbul (2019, 2022), Art Cologne (2023), and Investec Cape Town Art Fair (2018, 2021, 2022, 2023), including a solo booth in 2024. Her latest solo exhibitions include Rain Shadows (UJ FADA Gallery, 2023), The Weather Report Promised Rain (Berman Contemporary, 2023), and Heat Waves (Berman Contemporary, 2024).

In 2024, Chrisél Attewell had a solo exhibition with, HEAT WAVES, held at Berman Contemporary.

Chrisél Attewell is represented by Berman Contemporary

Instagram: [@chrisel_attewell](#)

Website: chriselattewell.com



INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPH | HEAT WAVES | BERMAN CONTEMPORARY | 2024

EXHIBITION STATEMENT BY CHRISÉL ATTEWELL

“Heat Waves” is an exhibition of transitions: from cold to hot, wet to dry, past to future, calm to angry. The exhibition includes a new body of oil and clay paintings surrounding a central installation work. The installation references two landscapes: the lush Bodhi Khaya in the Overberg and the semi-desert Tankwa Karoo. It also features a poem, titled “Thirsty Stones”, where I question the balances of power and vulnerability, reimagining the Tankwa as a foreign planet visited in some distant future.

The inspiration for this exhibition stemmed from a flood in September 2023 that devastated landscapes across the Western Cape, resulting in loss of life, displacement, and severe damage to infrastructure and homes. Two weeks later, I joined a group of artists at the Bodhi Khaya residency near Stanford, a town heavily affected by the disaster. The residency was cold, wet, muddy, and rainy. I was drawn to the natural clay deposits, enjoying its rich textures and colours. The clay, however, was incredibly heavy in this wet state. The weight of the clay seemed to mirror the heaviness in my stomach as I considered the devastation caused by the floods. I imagined the clay carrying the history, realities, and anxieties of the landscape.

During the residency, I wanted to create a shared experience among the artists using clay. We gathered at the quarry pond, forming a circle in the cold water, our eyes closed, and fingertips touching. Passing a large ball of wet clay from hand to hand, it left traces on our skin. We continued until it dissolved, mingling with the water or transferred to our bodies. Before starting, I asked the artists to consider the clay and the histories it might hold. Are we sceptical of it, or protective? Do we treasure it, or does it bring discomfort? How do we relate to each other when we share this weight? Do we offer reassurance, support, haste, distrust, or hesitation?

In that moment, our collective slow breathing seemed to calm us as we shivered in the cold water. It was as though breathing slowly allowed us to endure more. I was moved by everyone's commitment to the experiment. This idea of perseverance amid discomfort inspired the emotions behind the paintings. I relate this to moments of anger and fear, especially related to climate anxiety, and a need to breathe slowly to calm a racing heart.

This body of work, however, undergoes a transition from the cold and wet to the hot and dry. In April 2024, I attended another residency at Tankwa Artscape in the semi-desert Karoo region. Visiting desert landscapes often feels to me like stepping into the future. In this future, drought is reality and scarcity the norm. The Tankwa landscape also has natural clay deposits, referenced in the photograph used in the installation. The clay used in on the floor of the installation was, however, collected from the Bodhi Khaya landscape. It was interesting for me to consider the overlapping similarities and differences in these two seemingly opposite landscapes.

Similarly, a flash flood occurred two weeks before my arrival in Tankwa, an uncommon event in an area typically devoid of rain. Upon arrival, I observed the drying clay pans, leaving mesmerizing patterns of deep cracks. These patterns can be seen reflected in the cracked clay textures in the paintings. In many of the paintings, I started to pick off these clay cracks like picking at scabs, ripping away the gesso with it and exposing the underlying weave of the canvas.

My paintings evolved with my experiences in these opposing environments. Starting with flowing blues and contemplative undertones, they transformed into thick brushstrokes and cracked clay, mapping landscapes of contradictory conditions—wet and dry, cracked and fluid. Mostly, they reflect the array of emotions I felt, from calm endurance, waves of anger, bouts of frustration, and a desire to pick at the scabs in search of exposing some underlying truth.



SHARED SLOW BREATHS | 2024

Shared, slow breaths

by Chrisél Attewell

Together we stand in the deep cold.
Blinded, but sensing.
Fingertips grazing in soft reassurances.

Your breaths are slow.
They sound like endurance.

Reverberations of your shivers ripple toward me,
saying, I am here too,
feeling, enduring, sensing,
breathing,

with you.



Chrisél Attewell
Shared, slow breaths, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
143 x 310 cm
framed 145 x 316 x 6.5 cm



THIRSTY STONES

The land is dry, arid,
expansive and unending.
The heat: unrelenting.

Eternal skies loom ominous,
rendering me insignificant, irrelevant,
anonymous.

I am exposed.

Yet, to tiny creatures crawling and cowering,
I am power unchecked, unregulated,
unopposed.

If only there were no thirsty stones
threatening to suck and swallow
until I am hollow.

When all I am is bone,
this land will remember,
all I marked, made, and maimed.

It will digest and preserve
through salt and wind,
heat and fury.

I will no longer be alone,
exposed.

I will be the thirsty stones,
shading crawling creatures,
digesting,
unopposed.

BY CHRISÉL ATTEWELL, 2024





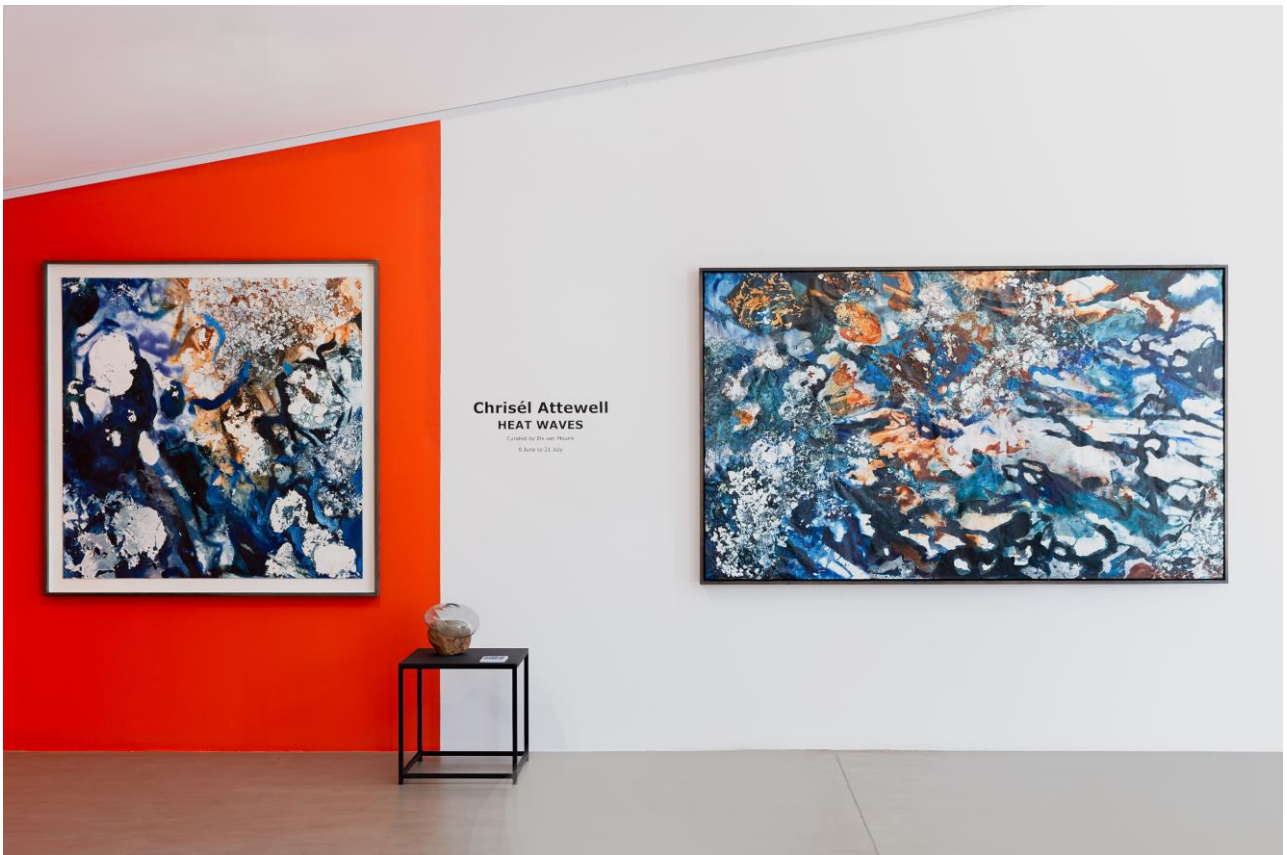
Chrisél Attewell
Slow breaths in the cold I, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
144 x 258 cm
framed 146 x 260 x 6.5





Chrisél Attewell
Slow breaths in the cold II, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
144 x 140 cm
framed 154.5 x 155 x 5 cm





Chrisél Attewell
HEAT WAVES
Curated by Lisa and Robert
8 June to 21 July

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Chrisél Attewell
Quick breaths in warm waters I, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
142 x 237 cm
framed 145 x 239 x 6.5 cm





Chrisél Attewell
Quick breaths in warm waters II, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
144 x 160 cm
framed 154 x 175 x 5 cm



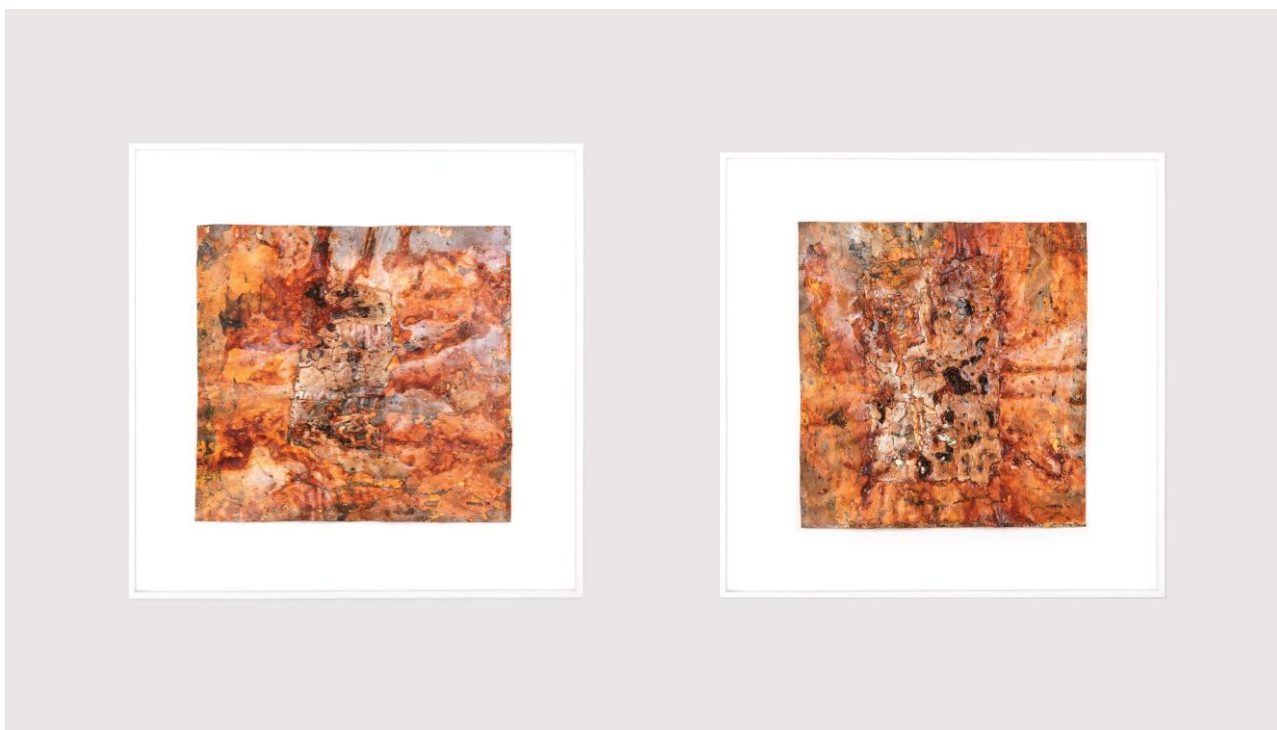


INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPH | HEAT WAVES | BERMAN CONTEMPORARY | 2024



Chrisél Attewell
Quick, sharp breaths, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
137 x 104 cm
framed 150 x 117 x 5 cm





Chrisél Attewell
Skins of the Forest III (1), 2019
Oil and Clay on Canvas
46 x 48 cm
framed 69.5 x 70 x 3.5 cm

Chrisél Attewell
Skins of the Forest III (2), 2019
Oil and Clay on Canvas
46 x 48 cm
framed 69.5 x 70 x 3.5 cm





Thirsty Stones
by Chrisél Attewell

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expansive and unending.
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shading crawling creatures,
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Seeing Stones | 2023

The title "Seeing Stones", phonetically reference both the words "sea" and "see". Within the broader context of the "Salt of the Earth" body of work, these sculptures engage with the shifting tides of our climate and oceans. The continuous rise of ocean levels is slowly but steadily submerging stones and encroaching on landmass. In these sculptures, water is imagined as glass. As water, over time, engulf the stones on the shore in its ever-swelling embrace, the glass is blown over the stone, expanding as it attempts to swallow it.

On another level, to "see" is to bear witness, to notice the subtle shifts and changes. The title "Seeing Stone" also reference a mystical crystal ball, a portal through which one might seek glimpses of the future. Climate anxiety carries significant weight, especially among younger generations. Considering the environmental challenges that the next generation will inhabit, leaves me with a heavy sinking feeling. In making these works, I imagine alternative futures and surrealistic landscapes, contemplating the stories embedded in water and stone.



Chrisél Attewell
Seeing Stone I, 2023
Glass and stone
14 x 20 x 22 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Seeing Stone II, 2023
Glass and stone
23 x 21 x 21 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Seeing Stone IV, 2023
Glass and stone
25.5 x 22 x 23 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Seeing Stone III, 2023
Glass and stone
15 x 17.5 x 20 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Seeing Stone V, 2023
Glass and stone
20 x 21 x 20 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Seeing Stone IV, 2023
Glass and stone
25.5 x 22 x 23 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Seeing Stone VII, 2023
Glass and stone
22 x 25 x 25 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Ghosts of Stone IV, 2023
River Cobblestone and Glass
21 x 18 x 18 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Sunken Stone, 2023
Glass and stone
14 x 17 x 17 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Seeing Stone X, 2023
Glass and Stone
18 x 25 x 25 cm



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GHOSTS OF STONE | 2023

The ramifications of human interference on the ecologies of the Cape region can be traced throughout the landscape. When I moved to the Western Cape in 2021, my environment changed from an urban one to a more natural one. My earlier work, made in Johannesburg, often involved collecting concrete rocks and scrap metal from the urban landscape. In the exploration of my new environment, I still noticed rocks in the landscape, but instead of the concrete rocks on construction sites that I grew accustomed to, this new landscape was scattered with large, rounded cobblestones. I noticed these rocks nearly everywhere, neatly lining multitudes of water channels, arranged in people's gardens, carefully stacked to construct walls, or wherever earthwork or digging had taken place.

Finding the sheer amount of these rounded stones curious, I visited the University of Stellenbosch's Botanical Gardens and spoke to Dr Donovan Kirkwood, curator of the gardens. He explained that these rounded cobblestones are a relic of this landscape, having once been a massive flat alluvial floodplain with its unique vegetation. Kirkwood explained that what remains today of this ecosystem is "a few tiny plots of a few hectares, all heaving with threatened plants that survive only on these tiny relics". Colonial farm establishment in the area meant that river frontage, from small drainage lines to main-stem rivers, was mostly in the hands of white farmers. This resulted in individual benefit decisions, including the choice to plough right to the river edge for farmland. Agricultural and urban development resulted in the loss of habitat for the river's natural buffers – the indigenous vegetation – ultimately leading to water runoff and over-abstraction. This, together with the damming up of water, meant that the natural flow of water was decimated.

To create Ghosts of Stone, I have blown glass vessels onto some of these river stones collected from my surroundings. These river stones are embedded with traces of the waters that had once shaped them. Glass also has an indexical relation to stone. Through erosion, rock turns to sand, and when applying immense heat to sand, it turns into glass. Just as humans share the same molecules as other living entities on earth, so glass and rock are made from the same "ingredients". All living organisms are dependent on water.

The shape of the glass is also connected to water, as it might recall the image of a bubble underwater, or a vase made to hold water. The shape furthermore references the human body, as it might recall certain organs or a female breast. With this shape, I reference my own body, connecting myself through my work to the landscape, as it is from the chest that these forms are blown. Particles of the water in my breath become additive traces in the shaping of the glass.



Chrisél Attewell
Ghosts of Stone IX, 2023
Glasswork
14 x 18 x 15 cm

Chrisél Attewell
Ghosts of Stone X, 2023
Glasswork
10 x 14 x 12 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Ghosts of Stone XI, 2023
Glasswork
12.5 x 14 x 16 cm



Chrisél Attewell
Ghosts of Stone V, 2023
Stone and Glass
27 x 24 x 24 cm



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Berman Contemporary South African Art

Berman Contemporary is a South African contemporary art gallery founded in 2018 by Candice Berman and rooted in Johannesburg. The gallery represents artists from South Africa who engage with the narrative of the country and focus on a visual art language in the African context.

Berman Contemporary has an exhibition programme which offers an art experience that celebrates the innovative and expressive lens of contemporary art by bringing together emerging and established talents from around the country. The exhibition programme represents a generation of creatives from the southern hemisphere who are standing up and expressing their voices by embracing their narratives and ancestral practices, all the while cherishing their values and belonging.

Berman Contemporary offers the artists an ongoing mentorship programme to support their artistic development and growth within the international art ecosystem. Emerging from this programme, we collaborate on developing new ways of working together, and together we shape ideas on how to present their work in a unique and interactive way. This ongoing support is a process of discovery and playfulness through continuous, generative engagement, which acts as a catalyst for interconnectedness with a wide range of art collectors and other talented forces.

**Berman
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